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VOLUME 49 #3

SEPTEMBER 2024

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# Sustainability takes centre stage

## Mulgrave Road Theatre breaks ground on a net zero cultural centre

by Philip Moscovitch

In 2016, the directors of the Mulgrave Road Theatre started thinking about expanding – and Emmy Alcorn says environmental sustainability was always “one of the key components” of the plan.

Alcorn is artistic director of the theatre company, located in Guysborough, on Nova Scotia’s Eastern Shore. “I started working here in 1987 as an actor and a musician and a technician, and I’ve been artistic director since 1995,” she says. “I came here for a two-year contract, and 29 years later, I’m still here – because I had this idea that I just couldn’t shake, and it was all about having a space for the theatre as well as for the community, where people could gather.”

On July 2, 2024, the company broke ground for that new space: the Mulgrave Road Theatre Arts Centre. Slated to open in 2026, it will be on the site of a former Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation building, incorporating the existing structure.

Long before these plans took shape, Alcorn was sketching out designs. She says her original thought was an off-grid theatre. “When I talked to different architects, they said that probably was not the best way to go – but there’s this other way you can go, which is zero-carbon, and solar power.”

The new arts centre is described on the Mulgrave Road website as “Atlantic Canada’s first purpose-built, net zero-carbon cultural facility.”

Architect David Gallagher, of Halifax-based firm Solterre, says working with an existing building means “there are some challenges from an efficiency standpoint.” One of those challenges is determining what to upgrade, and what to

leave be. For instance, the building was constructed without much insulation under the concrete slab.

“You don’t want to tear up the entire slab to make it a little more energy efficient, wasting all that concrete, and pouring new concrete, and all the carbon that comes with that,” Gallagher says. “You have to take a very practical approach to improving the efficiency of older buildings.”

His team’s plan calls for wrapping the building with insulation, beyond code requirements. They are also adding lots of windows, as well as electric heating, cooling, and ventilation systems. In the new section, insulation R-values will be double what the building code requires.

“Once we’ve reduced the energy needs as much as possible, we’ll put in the most efficient mechanicals we can, and then we try to offset that electric use,” Gallagher says. “We’re looking at around 87 percent of the building’s energy generated by their rooftop photovoltaic (solar cell) system.”

Alcorn says that in addition to being “the responsible thing to do,” taking this approach helped the organization unlock funding from the federal government’s Green and Inclusive Community Buildings Program, and Nova Scotia’s Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund. Public funding is covering about 80 percent of the cost, with the theatre fundraising the rest, in part through the sale of naming rights.

Alcorn says sustainability is “definitely” a hot topic of conversation for theatre companies across the country. She notes that the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres – to which Mulgrave Road belongs – now offers a Green Award.



A computer-generated image of the planned Mulgrave Road Theatre Arts Centre, an energy-efficient building incorporating the former Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation outlet in Guysborough, N.S. (Rendering by Solterre Design)



“Climate change is a game-changer for some rural companies,” she says. “When you talk about a rural company that’s in British Columbia and they’re doing outdoor theatre – well, they can’t do it because of smoke from wildfires, right? Then there’s another theatre company in Atlantic Canada that does outdoor theatre, and they had to cancel so many performances last summer because of rain.”

Though these concerns are top of mind for small, rural, arts organizations, it’s not easy for them to respond in a meaningful way. “Most theatre companies in Nova Scotia do not have the human resources and financial resources to do a lot,” Alcorn says. “But we are looking at how we can change.”

In working on the building’s design, Gallagher says he was always aware that its primary goal was to be what Alcorn calls “a factory to create art.” Ultimately, making the building as energy efficient as possible serves that goal. “They’re not spending thousands of dollars a year on heating and electricity and all this stuff that doesn’t really contribute directly to their making art,” he says. “It’s a smart financial move on their part, really.”

For Alcorn, the project is a way of acting on a long-term vision. “I want this building to take us into the future. I don’t want it to be obsolete in 10, 20 years,” she says. “As we all know, it costs so much to operate anything these days, in terms of just the energy. If we can get some of that energy from the sun – hey, I’m all for it.”

(Philip Moscovitch is a Nova Scotia freelance writer, editor, and audio producer who has written for many publications, including the *Halifax Examiner*, *The Walrus*, *Saltscapes*, and the *Globe and Mail*. This article was contributed via the Climate Story Network.) ●



Emmy Alcorn, longtime artistic director of Mulgrave Road Theatre, says the new facility currently under construction (below) is part of a vision for sustainability in rural communities – both culturally and environmentally. (Dan Hutt photos)

